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Special Report | Kenya-Somalia

Assessing Al-Shabaab's Threat to the Region as Somalia Joins the East Africa Community

8 December 2023

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The East Africa Community (EAC) is a regional intergovernmental organization comprising Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, South Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Established in 2000, its primary goal is integrating the economies of its member states and establishing a Political Federation of East African States.¹ Somalia joined as the eighth member of the regional economic bloc on 24 November 2023 during the 23rd Ordinary Heads of State Summit held in Arusha, Tanzania.² Though Somalia seeks to bolster economic development after three decades of conflict and political turmoil, al-Shabaab's activity poses a transnational security threat to the EAC bloc, especially to Kenya, its southern neighbor.

Risky Implications for Regional Security

Somalia submitted its first application to join EAC in 2012. However, the application was rejected — due to Somalia's prolonged civil war since 1991.³ In addition, the rise of al-Shabaab constituted a threat to Somalia, neighboring states, and the international community. The group has arguably controlled large swathes of Somali territory while also conducting large-scale attacks in other EAC countries, including Kenya and Uganda.

Consequently, Somalia remains one of the world's most violent countries in 2023. It ranks 21st highest globally in the [ACLED Conflict Index](#), which measures violence levels based on four key indicators: deadliness, danger to civilians, geographic diffusion of conflict, and the number of active non-state groups. In August 2022, the Somali government launched a military operation against al-Shabaab in central and southern Somalia, forcing the group into a defensive position but failing to achieve a decisive victory. Albeit weakened, al-Shabaab continues to maintain considerable strength and operational capacity, compounding the threat to the civilian population and security forces, and the possibility of expanding to other countries. At least 400 civilians were reportedly killed between January and November 2023 as a result of al-Shabaab's attacks against the civilian population, according to conservative estimates by ACLED.⁴

Regardless of this present threat, Somalia initiated another round of accession negotiations in 2023, after President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, who made an initial attempt to join the EAC during his first term in office in 2012, returned to power following his re-election in May 2022.⁵ However, Somalia's admission to the EAC poses security challenges, which risk diverting the union from its set objectives and goals.⁶

Somalia's Porous Borders

Somalia's admission to the EAC highlights long-standing concerns about security at the country's borders. Some of the security challenges include the spread of small arms and light weapons, the threat posed by al-Shabaab militants to security forces and civilians, and sea piracy. It also opens the potential for insecurity brought about by smuggling that remains rampant along Somalia's borders — especially from the Kismayo seaport southwards and along the border with Kenya.⁷ In 2012, Kenya closed its border with Somalia to prevent al-Shabaab's spread, and despite some timid attempts, its full reopening has since been indefinitely

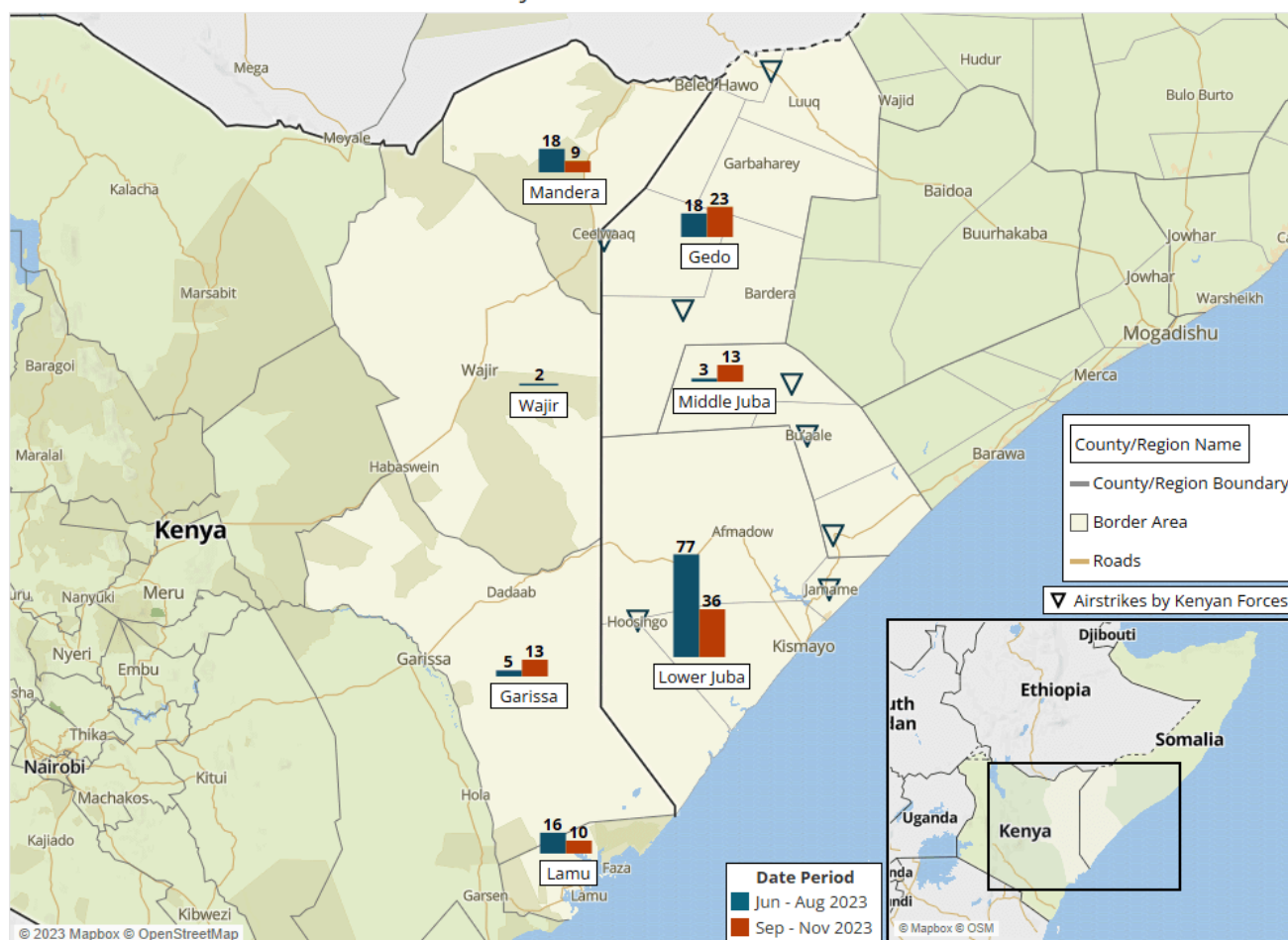
postponed.⁸ Nevertheless, al-Shabaab has been creating havoc in Kenya even with the closed border, leading to questions of how al-Shabaab's activity could escalate with the border opening facilitated by Somalia's admission to the EAC.

The admission comes with the opening of the Kenya border to Somalia without negotiations between the countries. Thus, the security challenges in Somalia may more easily expand to the rest of the partner states – particularly for its immediate neighbor, Kenya. Visa requirements do not apply to nationals of EAC member states, and they are free to move and do business across the region.⁹ Al-Shabaab operatives, who already take advantage of Somalia's porous borders to move across the region, may increasingly expand their reach, potentially heightening the security threat to other members of the ECA.

Currently, al-Shabaab remains the principal security challenge targeting both security agents and civilians along the Kenya and Somalia border. From September to November 2023, ACLED records 104 political violence events involving al-Shabaab militants in the Kenya-Somalia cross-border areas, out of which 32 events were on the Kenya side and 72 on the Somalia side (*see map below*). This represents a 25% increase in comparison to the three months prior, from June to August when 90 events were recorded.

Al-Shabaab's Activity Along the Kenya-Somalia Border

June - November 2023



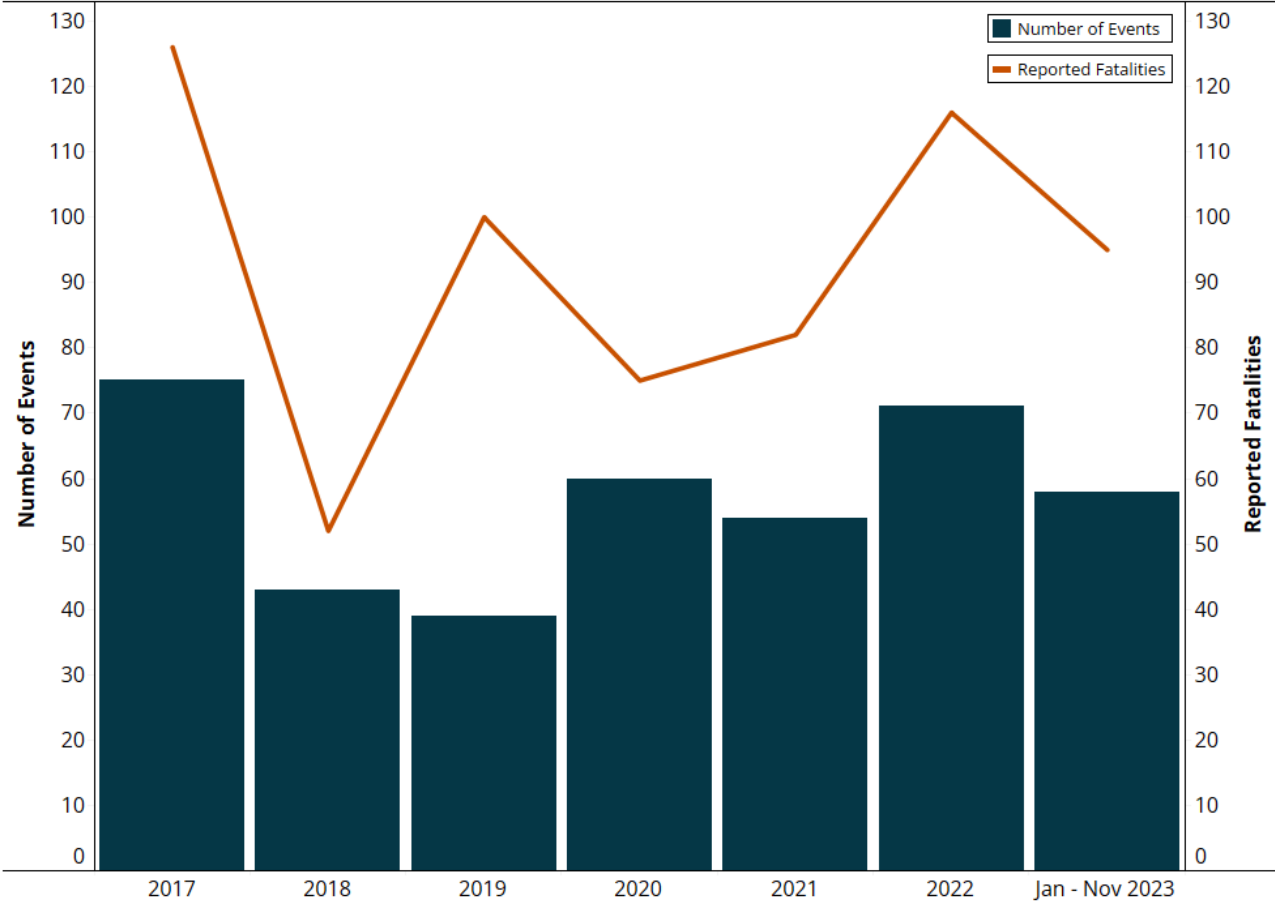
In response to al-Shabaab attacks in the four regions that border Somalia, Kenya security forces have conducted nine airstrikes in Somalia since June. These airstrikes targeted al-Shabaab stronghold areas in Gedo, Lower Juba, and Middle Juba regions. However, the impact of these airstrikes on al-Shabaab's operations is unclear as reports indicate civilian casualties and damage to buildings as a result of the strikes.¹⁰ The group's media reported that locals in al-Shabaab-controlled towns in Jilib, Middle Juba and Jamaame, Lower Juba, held protests – allegedly organized by al-Shabaab itself – against Kenyan airstrikes, accusing them of targeting civilians.

South of the border, al-Shabaab continues its activity well inside Kenyan territory. On 10 September, al-Shabaab employed a remote-controlled explosive to target Kenya military officers. The officers, eight of whom reportedly sustained injuries,¹¹ were hit with the explosive as they patrolled along the Milimani-Baure road near the Bodhei-Majengo area in Lamu county.

Civilians in the four Kenyan border regions have faced deadly violence by al-Shabaab. While ACLED records a decrease in al-Shabaab violence targeting civilians after a peak in 2017, attacks rose in 2022 and have continued at a similar rate in 2023 (*see*

graph below). Since January, ACLED records 23 incidents where al-Shabaab targeted civilians in Kenya, resulting in at least 23 reported fatalities — of which 21 attacks and 21 fatalities occurred in one of the four border regions. In 2022 and 2023 so far, al-Shabaab has increased its use of remote violence, contributing to the increased civilian casualties, along with attacks on government and private vehicles, as well as raids. Recently, militants beheaded an elderly man during one of their attacks. Reports indicate that suspected militants entered Marafa and Poromoko villages in Lamu county on 25 November, carrying weapons, killed livestock, looted, and set houses on fire — including one belonging to a National Police Reservist.¹²

Civilian Targeting by al-Shabaab Along the Kenya-Somalia Border
January 2017 - November 2023



Consequently, Kenya security forces continued to conduct airstrikes targeting militants. On 11 November, they launched an airstrike targeting an al-Shabaab hideout and gathering position in Warqo village in Badhaadhe district, Lower Juba, Somalia. The airstrike killed eight militants and injured fifteen. However, these airstrikes have not deterred al-Shabaab from staging other attacks on Kenyan security in both Kenya and Somalia, where they operate as part of the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), mandated by the United Nations Security Council.

The attacks have prompted increased security patrols in both Kenya and Somalia with the objective of enhancing overall cross-border security. However, the EAC's free movement of goods and people from the member state countries would allow al-Shabaab operatives to cross borders with legal Somali documentation and carry out attacks in the urban towns in Kenya and other member states. Kenya is already battling to tame al-Shabaab activities in Lamu and northeastern counties through coordinated patrol operations.

Prospects of Increased Regional Support

To tackle these security challenges, Somalia requested additional support from its neighbors Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Kenya, who agreed to contribute over 30,000 troops¹³ for the second phase of the counter-insurgency operation, which began in August 2023. These countries already operate in Somalia under the umbrella of the ATMIS, which replaced the former African Union Mission to Somalia in 2022. EAC member states, such as Uganda and Burundi, are also part of the troop-contributing countries to the ATMIS, and thus are familiar with Somalia's security situation.¹⁴ The EAC secretariat has also promised to support Somalia in overcoming

decades of political instabilities and economic recovery within the EAC Peace and Security Strategy.¹⁵ However, it remains unclear whether the EAC Regional Force – made up of troops from member states, which so far has only been authorized for the Democratic Republic of Congo¹⁶ – will replace ATMIS forces once the mandate of the African Union forces ends in December 2024 to support the Somali National Army in ongoing counter-insurgency operations in Somalia.¹⁷

Regardless, it is unclear how the EAC member states troop contribution could contribute to stabilizing Somalia after the withdrawal of ATMIS by the end of next year. The EAC Regional Force, deployed in the DRC in August 2022 following the invitation of the DRC government to fight against the M23 rebel group, began to withdraw on 3 December without bringing the conflict between the rebel group and DRC government to an end.¹⁸ Though faced with criticism from the Congolese government and the local population, for allegedly “cohabiting” with the M23 rebels rather than disarming them,¹⁹ the troops have been successful in warding off a potential attack on Goma International Airport and Goma town.²⁰ Thus, the EAC troops’ ability to bring stability to Somalia is contentious.

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